

Freeing up Free Education for Children

Kalol taluka in Panchmahals district belongs to one of the less developed parts of vibrant Gujarat. Panchmahals is home to fairly large sized communities of adivasis who have not benefitted from the economic development that has made the Patels and the Shahs well known across American and European business houses. Additionally, several hundred of families belonging to the minority community live below the poverty line (BPL). Schools are run by the government where education is provided free of cost up to matriculation level. Even those schools run by private trusts but aided by the state government are required not to charge tuition or any kind of fees from students.

Last December, 3–4 students approached Aslambhai a resident of Kalol with a complaint. They said they were being pressurised by their teachers every month to pay money as fees. The demands varied from Rs.10/- to Rs.35/-. If the students did not pay up teachers would turn up at their homes to collect the money. However no receipt was issued against such fee payments. This School is managed by a private trust but receives aid from the State Government. Aslambhai visited the Principal of the high school to enquire why the teachers charged fees from students. The Principal assured him that they had the power to collect whatever fees they wanted at any time.

Aslambhai had learnt about the Right to Information Act (RTI Act) recently. He knew that any private body substantially funded by the government was a deemed public authority under the RTI Act and was duty bound to give information on request. Aslambhai drafted an information request and submitted it to the Principal of the high school demanding to know –

- 1) How much fees can be legitimately collected from students?
- 2) For what purposes can the high school collect fees from students?
- 3) Copies of circulars or government orders giving details of the above information.

The Principal was taken aback when he received the information request. He requested Aslambhai to visit his office to discuss the application. He assured Aslambhai that no such fees would be collected from those students who had complained to him. Aslambhai was not content with this assurance. He insisted that the Principal give him a reply in writing that the school did not have any authority to collect any fees except fees for computer classes which the trust had begun at its own expense. The students of this school are happy because their teachers are no longer demanding any fees from them. Aslambhai believes that RTI works for those who once found themselves powerless before the powerful. He plans to tell as many people as possible in his taluka about the RTI Act.

{Aslambhai is one of 30 men and women in Panchmahals district, Gujarat trained by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative to use the RTI Act in 2005}